

“Pleasing aroma” and “Fragrant incense”

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“Pleasing aroma” is a key phrase in the Pentateuch. The question is what the smoke of the sacrifices does: does it “appease” God, or just “please” God? At this point, I do not feel comfortable making a definite decision, but at least I can present what some scholars say.

Notes on the phrase “fragrant incense”, which is also frequent in the Pentateuch, are added, because it is thematically related.

1. Pleasing odor / soothing aroma רִיחַ נִיחֹה $rê(a)h\ nîh\hat{o}(a)h$

1.1. Occurrences

- Gen 8:21 [= the only occurrence with the article on $nîh\hat{o}(a)h$]
- Ex 29:18/25/41;
- Lev 1:9; 1:13; 1:17; 2:2; 2:9; 2:12; 3:5; 3:16; 4:31; 6:8; 6:14; 8:21; 8:28; 17:6; 23:13; 23:18; 26:31;
- Num 15:3/7/10/13/14/24; 18:17; 28:2/6/8/13/24/27; 29:2/6/8/13/36;
- Ezek 6:13; 16:19; 20:28/41.

The phrase רִיחַ נִיחֹה $rê(a)h\ nîh\hat{o}(a)h$ **most often occurs before or after the general term** **עֹשֶׂה $iššeh$ ‘fire offering / gift’,¹ but can also refer to all kinds of more specific offerings:** the burnt offering (Lev 1:9), the peace offering (Lev 3:5), the sin [purification] offering (Lev 4:31), the grain offering (Lev 2:2), and the drink offering (Num 15:7).

The phrase is sometimes followed by the words “to the LORD”.

1.2. Meaning

רִיחַ $rê(a)h$ means “smell / odor / scent” (NIDOTTE, see entry # 8118).

נִיחֹה $nîh\hat{o}(a)h$ comes from the root נִיחַ nwh ‘rest’ etc. and is translated **“appeasement”** (HALOT). NIDOTTE (under # 5663) says: “The connotation of causing anger to rest or subside is evident in the nom./adj. $nîh\hat{o}(a)h$, soothing, pleasing, ...”

However, the commentaries present this rather differently: The *Handbook on Leviticus* (UBS, Péter-Contesse and Ellington, 1990) states (on Lev 1:9):

A pleasing odor to the LORD: this is a dynamic rendering of another technical term which is placed alongside the two preceding words. The phrase may be literally translated “aroma appeasing to the LORD.”
However, it is unnecessary to think of appeasement in the sense that God, angered by the sins of the people, had to be appeased by sacrifices. This expression is, in fact, used almost always of the whole burnt offerings

¹ $iššeh$ and $rê(a)h\ nîh\hat{o}(a)h$ seem to be used interchangeably or complementary in Lev 4:31/35, in the parallel cases of a goat and a sheep being offered[?].

(chapter 1), of the grain offerings (chapter 2) and of the fellowship offerings (chapter 3), but only once of a sacrifice in order to obtain God's pardon (4.31). It is possible therefore to translate this expression as "It is a whole burnt sacrifice with a pleasant odor which the LORD accepts gladly" or "in which the LORD takes pleasure and which he accepts."

Milgrom (Leviticus 1–16, AB, 1991) makes the same point. He translates "pleasing aroma" and comments (on Lev 1:9):

..., it must connote something pleasurable to the deity. Contrariwise, a rendering like "appeasing, placating, soothing," favored by many commentators and translators, should be avoided. To be sure, such a meaning for the term may be present in passages like Gen 8:21 and Lev 26:31 ... And a case for it can be based on the root *nwh* ... Yet, the rarity of this term in Israel's expiatory sacrifices can only signify that even if it had this meaning originally, it lost it in the cultic terminology of P. Maimonides was correct in his comment on the purification offering, "Its burning could not offer a *rêah nîhôah* to the Lord, but the contrary, I mean there was detestable and abhorrent smoke" (*Guide* 3.46.67-68). Hence the LXX rendering "sweet savor" and the rabbinic explanation *naḥat rūah* 'pleasure' (*Sipre* Num 143; see Tgs.) are right on target.

Levine (JPSTC, 1989) goes the same way (on Lev 1:9):

The idiom *reah nîhôah* means "a pleasant aroma." The unusual form *nîhôah* probably derives from the verb *nuaḥ*, "to rest, be at ease"—hence "experience pleasure, comfort." In the rabbinic tradition the linguistic connection with *naḥat*, "comfort, ease," is emphasized, expressing the thought that sacrifices offered in accordance with God's instructions bring Him pleasure, *naḥat ruah*.

Hartley's comments (WBC, 1992) are less clear. In the footnote, he renders "soothing, quieting" (referring to BDB), in the comment he speaks of "soothing aroma / sweet-smelling fragrance" and says (*ad loc.*):

Closely joined to אֶשָּׁה, "a gift," is the phrase נִיחֻחַ, "a soothing aroma," or "sweet smelling fragrance" (de Boer, *VTSup* 23 [1972] 40), for the latter phrase expresses the intent of this gift. The pleasant, soothing odor of the sacrifice that ascends toward heaven pleases God. While this metaphor is anthropomorphic, it is no more so than numerous other phrases in the OT, such as "the hand of God." ... This metaphor of "a soothing aroma" is very appropriate, for the sacrifice is offered in order to move God to remember with mercy the one who makes the sacrifice. Usually a whole offering was presented not to cool God's wrath but to seek his goodwill before his wrath might be kindled. Furthermore, this metaphor serves well to say that God himself must accept each offering in order for it to be efficacious without in any way indicating that God is dependent on these offerings for sustenance. De Boer (*VTSup* 23 [1972] 47) thinks that נִיחֻחַ is a technical term indicating "that the divinity accepts the sacrifice."

In conclusion, going by these commentaries, if offerings were offered in the right way, they pleased the Lord; but it is not the smoke that caused God to look favorably on the offerer. Therefore, translating "pleasing odor / pleasant smell" seems better than "soothing / appeasing aroma". However, some more substantiation in the argumentation would be desirable.

2. Fragrant incense קְטֹרֶת (הַ) סַמִּים *q̄ṭoret (has)sammîm*

2.1. Occurrences

- Ex 25:6; 30:7; 31:11; 35:8/15/28; 37:29; 39:38; 40:27;
- Lev 4:7; 16:12;
- Num 4:16;
- 2Chr 2:3 [Engl.4]; 13:11.

2.2. Meaning

סַמִּים is translated by HALOT as “spices”, and the phrase *q̣tōret (has)sammîm* as “**fragrant perfumes, frankincense**”.

NIDOTTE is very brief on the phrase *q³ṭoret (has)sammîm*. I can only find a mention of it under s.v. *rqh*, # 8379, vol. 3, p. 1197, where *sam* is translated “**fragrant perfumes**” (and a mention as “fragrant spices” s.v. *qtr*, # 7787, vol. 3, p. 915, without discussion).

Gesenius / Donner (18. ed., 2013) have „Wohlgerüche, Duftstoffe“ for the plural of *sam*, and for the whole phrase “wohlriechendes Räucherwerk” (*literally* well-smelling incense).

The phrase קֶטֶרֶת הַסַּמִּים *q̄ṭōret (has) sammîm* “fragrant incense” is always used only of the **incense that is appropriately utilized in the Tabernacle or the Temple**, not for pagan worship. It seems to denote the **specially fabricated incense from Ex 30:34f.** (Note the use of the root *rqh* for “perfume” in v. 35.)